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“The Footprint of Freedom”

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Storm causes longest B-1 combat mission in history

A 40th Air Expeditionary Group aircrew flying from an operating location in support of Operation Enduring Freedom completed the longest-ever combat sortie for a B-1 May 4.

The grueling 23-hour mission began May 3 when the 9th Expeditionary Bomb Squadron B-1 launched on a patrol over Afghanistan where it was assigned escort duty for an Army convoy just south of Kabul. After a successful mission, the crew tried to return to their original location but was diverted hundreds of miles to an alternate location due to a large storm moving into the area.

“It was a little windy (and) a little rainy before we left,” said Maj. Mark Bennett, the aircraft commander. “But nothing that indicated what the weather would be like when we returned.” This was Major Bennett’s 17th combat mission.

Captain Mark Johnson was the copilot of the crew and Captains Matthew Farley and Matthew Clapp were the weapons systems officers.

As they were returning at about three hours out, Major Bennett called in to check the weather conditions and found out about the impending storm.

“Conditions were rapidly degrading,” he said. “At that point, we knew we had to get back as quickly as we could before the severe weather hit.”

Captain Farley was the Offensive Systems Officer for the mission and could only see through



Master Sgt. Sean Brennan
A 40th AEG B-1 takes off on a combat sortie recently. A 9th EBS B-1 broke the record for the longest B-1 combat sortie in history May 4.

the side window of B-1 from his position behind the pilot. During the mission, his third actual combat mission, he had used his radar to map the ground in case they needed to take out any threats to the convoy.

“The radar looked really bad for weather,” he said, although admitting that it’s typically used for looking at storms. “We were zigzagging left and right to pick the best path through the storm.”

As they got closer, because of the weight of the aircraft and runway conditions, the crew had to either commit themselves to the landing or make the decision to divert elsewhere. They kept up contact with the base and the choice became a “rolling decision,” said Major Bennett.

Back at the base, another decision had to be made—whether or not to launch a tanker to possibly refuel the B-1 if conditions worsened, thereby giving up another aircraft.

“We launched it with the intention that it would almost certainly be diverted as well,” said Col. Jeff Beene, 40th AEG commander, who made the decision. “With the severe crosswinds, the tanker gave us much better options for getting the B-1 to a suitable location.”

After the tanker was up, this was a tremendous boost to the crew.

“When they told us ‘we’ve got a tanker for you,’ that definitely made a difference,” said Captain Johnson, who was on his 8th combat mission.

As the B-1 approached, the weather continued to worsen. From about 75 miles out, conditions were “pretty dicey,” said Major Bennett. “You don’t have time to worry. You’re just concentrating on flying the best approach possible while at the same time working out your other options if needed.”

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With just 10 miles to go and approaching at well more than 150 mph, the aircraft suddenly received the call to divert. This did not mean a sigh of relief though.

“Until we had the gas and were on the way, I was still a little concerned,” said Captain Farley. “There are a lot of things that still have to go right.”

After a successful refueling, the B-1 made straight for the alternate location, which was hundreds of miles away. At this point, the crew had already been in the air more than 18 hours.

“Normally, most people have a habit or routine going into (extremely long missions),” said Captain Clapp. “But we were expecting a (normal length mission).”

With all that was going on, Captain Clapp said he found it easy to stay alert though. He was one of the only members of the crew to have flown longer missions during previous (non-combat) flights. This was his 18th combat mission.

“No matter how tired everybody got, we were always going back to basics,” said Capt Johnson.

The next hurdle was one of diplomatic

sensitivities. To get to the alternate base, the crew had to traverse several other countries airspace—in a loaded bomber.

“It can be a little unnerving for them,” said Captain Clapp.

After the air traffic controllers were told it was an emergency situation because they lacked the fuel to go around, the countries allowed the flight.

After landing, the aircrew had another job for them—get the jet refueled, serviced and ready to go again—duties typically performed by maintainers. Though the aircrew is trained on this periodically, it is not something they do often and ended up taking 2 to 3 hours, said Captain Clapp.

“The sense of duty shown by this crew for getting this aircraft turned around and ready to go after a marathon mission like this is just incredible,” said Colonel Beene. “But it is dedication like that I witness every day from the great men and women deployed here.”

By the time the crew finally got to their bunks, they had all been up between 36 and 38 hours, including the mission brief, flight and maintenance.

“I’ve never been up that long before,” Capt Johnson said. “That was the longest day of my life.”